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ABSTRACT

In several brief sections, this pamphlet defines play, discusses how play helps a child develop, and how play changes as a child grows older, indicates the role of toys and certain play activities in promoting sex stereotypes, and identifies the role of fantasy and imagination in children's play. A discussion of the role of parents in fostering their children's play concludes the pamphlet. The pamphlet, one of a series produced by the Division of Scientific and Public Information, National Institute of Mental Health, is designed primarily to help parents care for their children and themselves in ways that promote good mental health. However, the pamphlet may sometimes be useful for others, such as relatives, school teachers, and babysitters, who play important roles in the lives of children. (Author/RH)

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THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY

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Caring about Kids is a series of pamphlets produced by the Division of Scientific and Public Information, National Institute of Mental Health, to help parents care for their children and themselves in ways that promote good mental health. Primarily for fathers and mothers, the subject matter of *Caring About Kids* will sometimes be useful for others, such as other relatives, school teachers, and babysitters, who play important roles in the lives of children.

Caring About Kids uses either "she" or "he" throughout an entire pamphlet. The choice of gender is alternated from pamphlet to pamphlet, but the information in each pamphlet is applicable to children of *both* sexes.

Single free copies of *Caring About Kids* can be received by writing to:

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THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY

What happens when you toss a ball to a child?

It depends on the size of the ball, on the age of the child, and to some extent on what *you* expect to happen.

A baby, not knowing how to catch the ball, probably watches it go by. He may retrieve it and, if the ball is small enough, put it in his mouth. A toddler may try to catch the ball and miss. A preschooler may catch it but not be able to toss it back as well as he would like. An elementary school child may suggest forming a team and making up rules. An older child may throw the ball back so fast that even you can't catch it.

What's your next move? If you were the child, what would *you* like to happen? How the parent reacts to a playing child can be important. It can affect how a child feels about himself and what he can do, as well as whether he wants to keep playing and learn more.

What Play Is

Play is a child's way of living and learning. Enjoyable, voluntary, spontaneous, and sometimes frustrating, it is a storehouse of experiences. Although it requires active participation on the part of the child, play is not oriented toward meeting goals, nor is play required to have a beginning, middle, and end. Play surrounds a child with wonder, leading him on, testing his body and mind; play lets a child try out roles and learn about things, people, skills, language, and concepts.

There are many differences in the way children play. For example, some children enjoy focusing on details; others like to deal with all the surroundings. Children do not play at the same speed or in the same way. What challenges one may threaten another. The same child may differ from day to day, even from moment to moment, in what appeals to him or what overwhelms him.

Play is a child's private treasure chest that he alone fills. An adult may help by putting pieces where a child can reach them or suggest ways they can be used. However, once a child begins to play, it becomes his world, arranged to suit his needs. By bringing things together in ways that please him, straightening and arranging pieces and parts, a child discovers new ideas and adds them to what he already knows. To most children, play is life. It is usually fun and certainly an important part of physical and mental development.

Physical development occurs naturally during active use of the body in play. The larger muscles are used in climbing, running, balancing, and pulling. Fine motor skills improve as hand and eye movements are coordinated for cutting and pasting, working puzzles, painting, or even pouring water. Play is valuable for learning to express emotions like joy, frustration, anger, and pride. If need be, these can be dealt with as soon as they occur. Children can be led to act out anger through stories, pictures, toys, and clay. As children learn to express emotions and ideas, their awareness of themselves and their environment grows.

How Play Helps a Child Develop

Sometimes parts of a puzzle, a toy house, or a build-it-yourself locomotive or truck do not come together in the way a child planned. When this happens, the child sifts and sorts and changes some of the parts to see if he can make the object work through a different arrangement. Each time a child succeeds on his own terms, he's satisfied with himself. He begins to feel that the world is at his fingertips. When toys and other playthings and play activities do not challenge him, he may think that what he does has no effect; he may even stop trying. The more he sees, hears, and does in the way of play at an early age, the more he will try to do as he grows older.

The thinking of a young child is often creative but is bound neither to logic nor to reality. If playing with objects is fruitful at the start and guided properly, the pleasure of playing with toys and other materials becomes linked in the child's mind to mastering problems in general.

Some of the best playthings are not found in stores at all but in the house—pots and pans, empty spools and discarded broomsticks, clothing to be cast away, scraps of lumber (sanded to eliminate the danger of splintering) in the basement or the storage room. All these can provide high fun for the imaginative child (all normal children are imaginative) and can encourage his creativity.

As the child touches, lifts, holds, arranges, and sorts, he finds that objects have different weights, textures, and uses. He sees how objects work alone and what happens when they're put together. Sometimes he is fooled. A very young child, for example, may think that there is more to drink when the water from a large container is poured into two or more smaller containers. An older child knows better because he's had more experience manipulating things and experiencing reality. Play and the manipulation of objects are bases of creativity and invention later on. The creative adult retains the sense of childhood play.

It takes time for a child to develop an understanding of the relationship among objects. The first time he does a jigsaw puzzle, he may cry when he makes a mistake. But as the pieces start coming together, ideas begin to click, and the child becomes excited. After he masters the puzzle, he may mess it up on purpose or hide some of the pieces to make it more difficult. He may purposely put pieces in the wrong place, then correct himself in mock conversation. He may also trace pieces on paper to see what they look like in two-dimensional form.

Children do what they know how to do. As they practice, they learn more. Sometimes they look as if they were doing the same thing over and over; usually though, they are actually solving a problem, practicing skills, or exploring the many ways a single object can work. As they learn more, they find creative ways to use their new knowledge.

Children also like to take things apart or knock them down, but destruction is not necessarily bad. It takes work and control to build a sand castle. Smashing it in gives the child freedom to begin again. What looks like destructive play may only be a search for new effects. As another example, a child may first play with blocks by holding them and feeling their shapes. He tries them in different positions, building up, balancing out, knocking them over, and starting again. Doing the same thing over and over may not make sense to an adult, but this kind of play is done for the sheer joy of using power. That's why it's all right to make a mistake and start over again.

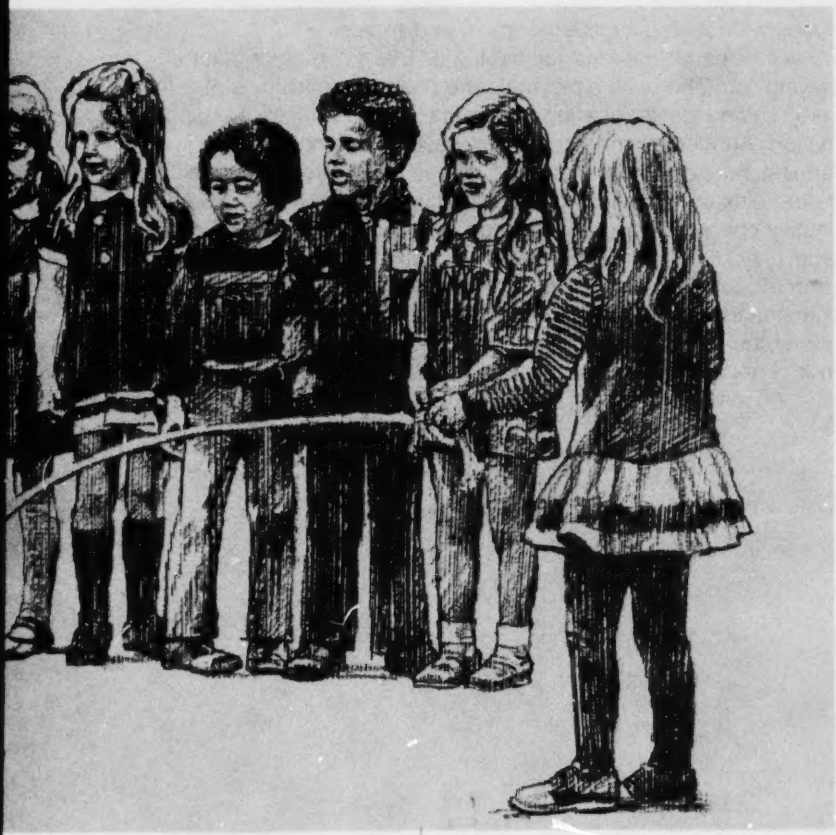
Play helps a child master important skills as well as learn facts and relationships. Imitation is one of these skills. Our complicated behaviors, such as talking, working, and thinking, develop, in part, because we first imitate someone else. A mother mimics the baby's handclapping. The baby, pleased with this reaction, claps hands again. It's an easy exchange that is full of good feelings and delight for both the child and the parent. A child often imitates what others are doing. By the time he is 2 years old, he can imitate people, even when they are not there; he can even be his own audience. He borrows roles from adults—acting out activities like reading, sweeping, and telephoning. At about the fourth year, he finds more imaginative ways to use these roles in make-believe play.

A child may not think of play as make-believe. Using pets and toys (especially dolls) as substitutes for people, he can do, through play, what he is not permitted to do in life; he can "go" where he is not allowed to go.

Play develops interest and talent in solving problems just because they exist. During play, children set up and solve problems independent of adult praise and approval; they find pleasure in completing the task by themselves.

Through toys and other materials, children also learn to move out of themselves and face reality; they learn to think things through and thus to plan ahead. For example, they see that a doll carriage can be a shopping cart, a boat, or a delivery van; then they come to realize it cannot go through an opening that is too narrow for it. Another route must be planned.

One of the social realities a child quickly discovers during play is how other children react to him. At first he may treat other children as things. When this does not bring the wanted approval and acceptance, a child must learn the give-and-take of cooperating with others. In the beginning, children may only watch each other playing, mentally practicing what they later will do themselves. Then they play *next to* and eventually *with* others. By the age of 3 or 4, a child is sharing interests and materials and exploring dramatic roles with others. At times, his play may seem like half cooperation and half bossiness.



A child who is used to playing only with a parent may try to take the parent's role when he plays with other children and force others into lesser parts. He may begin by saying, "I'm the father." If there is already a "father" and the other children do not want to give him the role, he has the choice of sitting by the sidelines or accepting another part. As he learns to play in groups, he is more ready to take turns in informal games, such as maneuvering trucks and cars, and playing house or doctor.

Cooperative social play is important for teaching children how to use objects and activities as substitutes for the real thing. In addition to teaching children how to relate to other people and how to use symbolic activities, play helps children learn how to live in a particular place in the particular way the culture expects. (This is how social rules and morals are learned.)

Research suggests that, when opportunities to play are denied, both children and animals fail to learn as effectively as those who have freedom through play to experiment and explore.

Play helps prepare us for adult life. Even nursery school children playing "pretend" with a playmate are practicing principles of give-and-take, setting goals, sharing the same space, and exchanging information. An element of competition, such as seeing who can jump the farthest, may enter into a game. Children often invent rules which even 3-year-olds understand without being taught by an adult. Children continually check and correct mistakes by monitoring one another. In pretend play, they will exchange rules, make up definitions, and put a "frame" on the situation as they go along. Until the group formally changes them, the rules are binding. For instance, if a boy playing the role of the son asks for coffee, he will be corrected and told to ask for milk; if he later plays the father and asks for coffee, that's all right.

Toys and Sex Stereotyping

Children are exposed to sex stereotyping through games and toys at a very early age. Boys, simply because of age-old tradition, are given toy soldiers and tanks and airplanes and encouraged to climb walls and trees and to take other chances. Girls still receive dolls and small copies of stoves, refrigerators, electric irons, and other household appliances; they are encouraged to help mother or an older sister. However, this situation is gradually changing. Many people now realize that it is quite all right and even desirable for boys to play with dolls and help with the housework and for girls to climb fences and play baseball.

Such activities help prepare boys and girls for an adult life in which traditional duties of husbands and wives are coming more and more to be shared. As one instance, the father's role in bringing up the children, from infancy on, is now recognized as every bit as important as the mother's. Parents might well consider encouraging children to follow their interests rather than restricting them to activities once considered appropriate for their sex. Such restrictions can limit development.

How Play Changes as a Child Grows Older

At about age 3, the issues of power and violence arrive in play. Children practice power tactics on each other (such as threats, pushes, kicks, screams, and fights). They try to exclude others in order to get what they want, or they try to work their way into a group by smiling, bribing, or making someone else the target of ridicule and shame. Four-year-olds may keep their group life intact by scapegoating an innocent person.

Between the ages of 4 and 5, children enjoy order and like to create ritual (doing the same thing over and over). They have rules for girls and for boys, for where babies come from, and for anything else of interest. What they don't know, they invent.

By 5 years of age the child is more selective in choosing playmates; his play becomes more complex and lasts for a longer time. But even a 5-year-old enjoys not only playing with friends, but also playing alone next to them.

Five-to-seven-year-olds like to get through a game without a mistake, but they also delight in limited disorder (like whirling around until they fall down with dizziness). Between 5 and 7, a child begins forming his own opinion of the balance between work and play.

Eight-to-twelve-year-olds enjoy learning how to use adult tools like sewing machines, potter's wheels, and motor-driven implements. They also like to play games with adults, make models, and play musical instruments.

Teens are attracted to adult forms of play. Young teenagers are not happy with toy versions of *anything*. They want community recognition for sports and hobbies. They become bargain hunters and catalog readers; they love to dance and sing, and they tend to put more energy into play than into work.

Children's play is full of the content of their lives; it is a process, not a product. Encouraging children to touch, taste, see, smell, and hear their world with all its wonders and delights is more important than providing them with a roomful of toys.

Play occurs at all times of life. It is a principal basis of creativity in adults as well as in children.

14.

Fantasy and Imagination

Fantasies, daydreams, and imaginings help bring serenity and purpose into everyone's life. They also can be signs of unfulfilled needs and desires. They help people to be more creative as well as to endure hardship. They also help children bridge that gap between concrete experience and abstract thought. A common phenomenon is the make-believe playmate, an imaginary person in whom the child confides and to whom he talks, as if he were more real than any real person the child knows—as, indeed, the imaginary playmate may well be for a time. Children use their imagination also to work out the parts of life they see and want to know more about. For instance, a child acts out make-believe family scenes in an attempt to find answers to problems, including how to understand parents.

Fantasizing can also help a child's language ability. Children play with language in a number of ways. They play with the words as words, try to make rhymes with them, use them to invent fantasy stories, make up nonsense or secret ways of talking, or imitate adult conversation. Social play involving language is good for developing both communication skills and an understanding of concepts behind the words.

Play materials provide an excellent means of developing senses of sight, hearing, and touch; they give children something to think or fantasize about, and add to their powers of imagination. As children use materials during play, they learn about objects and activities, coordinate their senses, understand their environment better, and develop more complicated responses (both in action and thought) to communication by word or deed.

How Parents Can Help

Some experts feel that if the motivation for play comes from the child it is play, but if it comes from outside it is work. Mark Twain once said that play consists of whatever a body is not obliged to do. Work is a means to an end; play is an end in itself. Play is its own reward.

The key for parents is to support and encourage play but not to dominate it. Parents should take cues from what the child has shown an interest in or an ability for. The more freedom a child has in play development, the more his awareness of the world will grow. If too many expectations are thrust upon him or demands made, a child's motivation may be crushed. He needs the opportunity to try out skills; at the same time, he needs to know that he is free to make mistakes on his own terms and at his own speed.

A parent's role is similar to that of a gardener preparing the soil, making sure that the right ingredients are there and that the soil is tilled to help the plant grow straight and strong. Parents can structure the environment but not the play itself; they may suggest, say "stop" (for safety's sake), or be ready to help a child shift to other activities. But they should offer help only when needed (like showing how to use a toy or explaining complicated rules for a game). Otherwise children may come to demand intervention frequently—sometimes to punish a playmate.

From the very start, it is important for parents to stimulate their baby's senses, to provide toys that have cause-and-effect relationships (for instance, a string that rings a bell or sets a mobile by the crib in action), for these build up motor control and teach children that they can make things happen. Pull toys make a child feel in charge of the action. One of the infant's most sensitive pieces of learning equipment is his mouth. Rubber rings and strings of balls let him practice grasping, sucking, and chewing.

About the age of 3 months, an infant begins to show purpose in reaching for things. He should be encouraged to reach for safe objects, feel them, and hold them. He needs safe toys or household objects to exercise with. And he enjoys grasping others' fingers to help move him into an almost sitting position.

Snuggling up to a child, clinging to him, and stroking him can give him a feeling of security. When someone is not around to play with a child, a familiar blanket or a furry toy animal will comfort him.

Babies can be introduced to texture and shape by having many things to touch, finger, squeeze, and stroke. As each object is named, the child begins to link objects, actions, and words. An infant needs encouragement in such attempts.

The environment consists not only of objects to play with, but also of people—parents, siblings, and peers—with whom a child needs to interact. As a matter of fact, children like to play near adults because that is where exciting things happen. Also, it is where the child, particularly the young child, feels safe. The most interesting objects to children are parents or siblings. How other people react, either consciously or unconsciously, encourages or discourages a child's imaginative play.

For instance, if a child drops a ball from a high chair and the parent replaces it smilingly, the child may feel free to see what happens as the ball drops. If disapproval is voiced, he may feel discouraged and not try again. Free floor space is needed for building with blocks, playing house, and moving around vigorously.

When children are encouraged to tell their own stories, paint their own pictures, act out their own fantasies, construct their own worlds, they are better able to hold onto their own hopes and dreams. Without that support, dreams may fade and, along with them, ambition and self-approval.

Play provides much information about a child's abilities. By watching a child play, a parent can learn how the child feels about himself and how the environment is affecting him. Play is a good barometer for knowing when a child is having problems, for he may act out his hopes and fears. Many therapists use play as a primary way of communicating with children, discovering their problems, and helping them improve their mental health.

Each time a child learns a skill, at first through play, new levels of difficulty should be available. Children who try more challenging tasks gain security and confidence from knowing they can return to what they have already mastered if they so choose. A large number of toys is not as important as a balanced variety that touch upon numerous areas of development.

Children are never too old to play. Learning to play helps them in their thinking and their work. When you help children become a part of the playing process, you will always be welcome in it. No matter how old you both become, the fun of play will remain. Whenever your child throws the ball in your direction and yells "Catch!" you will rejoice in your efforts of bygone years. Play is a lifetime activity, important to both physical and mental health.

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